

## **Luke 2, 22-40: Destiny**

*St Laurence Church, Seale, 29.1.17*

It's very good to be here for your joint service this morning – and great to be celebrating Candlemass in a church which has a stained glass window devoted to Anna and Simeon, two of the heroes of this season. Thanks to Delia and the Wardens for the invitation.

May I speak in the name of God...

A few years' ago, I was sent a Christmas newsletter by one of my friends, which rather stood out from the usual descriptions of holidays to Majorca and Anna (12) having passed her Grade 5 Flute with distinction; and here's part of what Andrew had to write:

*'Much of my work since becoming the Anglican Chaplain to Iraq in 2005 has been diplomatic and political – but above all I have been caring for the Church I re-opened in 2003. The Iraqi congregation has grown to over 4000, and in addition we have the largest clinic in Baghdad.*

*'Each day on my way out of morning prayer, I used to look at the names of old college members who had been martyred... Last year 93 of my congregation were killed. I baptised 13 adults – and 11 of them were killed the following week. I have been held at gunpoint, shot at, kidnapped. I am surrounded by soldiers all the time for my protection, and*

*am not allowed to walk down any road. Last Sunday the temperature reached 56 degrees centigrade.*

*'Not the kind of job that would get many applicants from a Church Times advert. Yet it is the most wonderful job I have ever had. I love the people in my Church and they love me'.*

And as I read those words, so it struck me as amazing that any sane man or woman could describe something like that as 'the most wonderful job I have ever had': amazing, that is, until I began to think about the Christian's destiny, the Christian's calling. For one of the things I've discovered during 42 years of following Jesus is that when we discover our destiny, when we live out our calling, there is an extraordinary sense of fulfilment even in the midst of the most challenging of circumstances. That doesn't mean that we're all called to live in Baghdad, of course, or all called to be Vicars! But it does mean that discovering our God-given destiny is vital if we're going to make the most of the years that we have on Planet Earth.

Now today's Bible reading takes us right back to Christmas, just when you thought it was over: because the moment Luke has finished telling us about Caesar Augustus and the birth of baby Jesus in a stable - and the shepherds and the angels - he moves on to this story where Mary and Joseph travel a few miles from Bethlehem to the Temple in Jerusalem to present their newborn son to the Lord and to offer sacrifices: the Jewish equivalent of a baby being dedicated or christened.

There are five people in this story (*fingers...*). One is the baby, just 8 days old. Another is his mother, who's maybe just a teenager or in her early twenties. A third is his father, a carpenter by trade, who's probably rather older. And then there's an elderly man called Simeon, who's likely to be dead in a year or two; and an even older woman called Anna, who may have been 84, or was possibly more than a hundred, if Luke means that she'd been a *widow* for 84 years! There's an incredible age range in this Gospel story, in other words: as Jeremy Clarkson might put it, it goes from 0 to 100 in just ten verses!

So do these five have anything in common, apart from the fact that they're meeting up in the Jerusalem Temple? Yes: what they have in common is that they're all living out their calling, their destiny under God.

What was the calling of **Anna**, the eldest of the five? It was to be a prophetess, to fast, to pray and to worship God night and day in the Temple. Even today many wise Christian women commit themselves to this task, especially towards the end of their lives. They can no longer head up the Sunday School or get involved in the active ministry of the Church – in fact it's often important that they hand that on to the next generation; but what they can do is to pray. And without their prayers, the Church would be a far smaller, poorer place: for just as our children are the church of today, not simply the church of tomorrow, so our elderly are the church of today, not simply the church of yesterday.

Next in line is **Simeon**, another OAP, and unlike Anna he seems to have had a very specific calling. Some years before he'd been told by God that he wouldn't die before he'd seen the Messiah: so that as he took the baby Jesus into his arms and blessed him, this was his big moment, the climax of a long life, the fulfilment of his destiny. 'Sovereign Lord', he prayed, 'as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace'.

And again there are some people today like Simeon: those who have a clear sense of their calling, even if that only comes to fruition very late on in their lives.

What was **Joseph's** calling? At heart it was simply to take Mary home to be his wife and to provide a secure and loving home for his young family, whatever the gossip that surrounded Mary's pregnancy and the birth of her child. And Joseph reminds us that destiny and calling aren't just to do with what we get up to in church: they are as much to do with our faithfulness to our marriage partners, our children, our parents: doing all we can to provide a secure and loving environment for those who depend on us to blossom and to thrive.

What was **Mary's** calling? Well, said the angel Gabriel, it was to conceive and give birth to a son, and to give him the name Jesus. True, warned Simeon, but that wasn't going to be easy: 'a sword will pierce your own soul also'.

Heartache and blessing: that was to be Mary's experience as she lived out her destiny; and as the ministry of the Anglican Chaplain to Baghdad reminds us, the two so often continue to go together – heartache and blessing - as we live out our calling under God.

And what of **Jesus**? Could an eight-day old boy really have a destiny? Well, this one could, and what a destiny! He was to be great and to be called the Son of the Most High. He was to reign over the house of Jacob forever. He was to be 'Immanuel', God with us. He was to save the people from their sins. He was to bring light to the Gentiles and glory to his people Israel; and so it went on.

And Jesus was unique, of course. But even from *our* birth: even from the first moment we were brought into church to be baptised or dedicated, God had plans for us. From 0 to 100 and beyond, we each of us have a part to play in God's great plan of salvation. And we do that together with our Christian brothers and sisters, of course, just as Anna and Simeon and Joseph and Mary and Jesus did: each of us contributing our part to the mission of God in this generation.

So how does that work? Does God map out our lives in every detail and expect us to follow his directions every step of the way? Has God already prepared exactly what we should be doing, say, in 10 years' time from now: precisely what we should be eating for breakfast, say, on Saturday, January 29th 2027? And if we then eat

the wrong thing for breakfast on January 29<sup>th</sup> 2027, does that mean that God's perfect plan has somehow been spoilt?

I remember meeting one lady in London who thought a little like that. In her early twenties she'd sensed that God was calling her to become a missionary, but had resisted the call, and gone off and done something else instead. And now, more than thirty years later, she was full of regrets, believing that her life had been a complete waste – that she'd set off in the wrong direction as a young adult, and now there was no turning back.

But I wonder whether we might look at destiny another way: because destiny, of course, has to do with destination; and the destination of every Christian believer is Heaven. In terms of this Satnav, which I used this morning to find the quickest route from GU4 7QS to GU10 1HZ, Heaven is our home: it's the place to which each one of us is travelling.

So what happens if I go the wrong way out of the church later this morning? Does that mean that I'll never get home? Well, I suppose it might if I were to ignore the voice on my Satnav for a whole lifetime – if I were simply to go by my feelings and turn right or left according to which road looked the prettiest. Sadly there are people around us who are living life exactly that way.

But suppose I keep my Satnav on, and still set off in the wrong direction? Well, at any stage the route can be recalculated; at any

stage, as we begin to listen once more, God can renew our destiny as his sons and daughters – he can show us the way to get home.

Of course that way may be tougher than it needed to be. For those who had their Satnavs switched off at crucial times in their lives – times when they were making major decisions about their faith or their career or their marriage partner, it can seem a long, hard road ahead. But that doesn't mean that our destiny has passed us by, or that our lives have been a waste. True, we could have saved ourselves some heartache if we'd been more attuned to the voice of God. But even that heartache – even that experience of lostness and confusion - can be used powerfully in God's Kingdom as we start to listen to his voice once more.

And it's not a perfect image – for God of course is completely personal and not some impersonal machine: but how important that we open ourselves afresh to God's calling, his destiny, as we look to the road that lies ahead: that we listen to God's still small voice as individuals, yes, and also as church communities, listening to and following Christ together in this part of the journey.

I'm sorry not to be able to join you later on, but what a great new initiative you're starting today with the village lunch in The Sands Room – and while times of vacancy have their challenges, and require all hands on deck, what an opportunity they give us too to release the gifts of all God's people. How might 2017 be a rich year here in Seale, Wanborough, Puttenham, as you draw nearer to God, nearer to each other and nearer the communities you serve?

How might each of you fulfil your destiny, whether you're elderly like Anna and Simeon, middle-aged like Joseph, a young adult like Mary, a child like Jesus?

'How can I be most fruitful in God's service?' Perhaps that's the most important question of all. 'How can I make the very best of my remaining years here on Planet Earth?' For the great thing is this: that when God calls he equips; and when God calls and equips, even the ministry of the Chaplain to Baghdad can be the most wonderful job in the world.